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ABSTRACT

A lesson designed to teach usage of pronoun case within a communicative paradigm in English as a Second Language is presented. The target population consists of adult, intermediate-level ESL students. The lesson begins with a chant to gain students' interest and create a relaxed learning atmosphere. Next follows a pantomime that illustrates the difference between subjects and objects using Total Physical Response techniques. This activity is supported by a chart on which the teacher transcribes the sentences students produce during the exercise. All the nouns are substituted for pronouns. Students are then invited to give examples based on the chant. This stage bridges the gap between language elicited through Total Physical Response and language in text form. Visual aids are encouraged. To close the oral activities, a set of exercises drills the featured constructions. Remaining instruction focuses on the explicit teaching of grammar and stresses only rules that can be activated during language production. Written exercises are recommended to reinforce this learning. Comments are offered on use of pronouns in formal and informal language. The chant and supporting instructional materials are appended. (Author/MSE)

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Pronoun Case: Teaching Grammar within a Communicative Paradigm

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Abstract

This paper suggests a set of activities to teach the usage of pronoun case within a communicative paradigm. The target population consists of intermediate, adult ESLers. The lesson begins with a chant to grab the students' attention and create a relaxed learning atmosphere. Next follows a pantomime that materializes the difference between subjects and objects by means of total physical response. This activity is further supported by a chart on which the teacher transcribes the sentences the students produce during the interaction. All the nouns are substituted for pronouns. Third, the students are invited to give examples based on the chant. This stage bridges the gap between language elicited through total physical response and language present in a text. Visual aids are also encouraged. To close the oral activities, different exercises drill the featured constructions. The remaining instruction focuses on the explicit teaching of grammar and stresses only rules that can be activated during language production. To conclude, written reinforcement is proposed, followed by some final remarks on formal and informal usage.

"To *he* or to *him?*" If your ESL students have trouble in making this judgment, they need a therapeutic treatment: a communicative lesson on pronoun case. When I say communicative, I mean a creative, meaningful, and pleasant lesson; one which though grammar-based in essence, serves the social function of language, providing ESLers with valuable tools to achieve communicative competence.

Thereafter, here follows a set of communicative activities that embody these qualities, and that I use with my class of intermediate, adult ESLers. These activities enhance their understanding of pronoun case and didactically remedy the confusion between the usage of objective and subjective forms.

To begin with, I recite a chant, specifically written for this lesson, that functions both as an ice-breaker and an attention grabber (see appendix A). (You might choose to adapt a song, or a poem, depending on your learners' variables). I recite the chant aloud, very expressively. Then I hand out a copy of the chant, and invite the class to pair up and clap as we recite the chant in chorus (this activity caters to auditory, visual and kinesthetic learners, besides providing a relaxing learning atmosphere).

Second, I use total physical response -- a pantomime -- to materialize the environment in which one case, and not the other occurs. I discretely ask a student to throw a crumpled piece of paper at a second student, immediately turning my back and walking in the direction of the board. After the action takes place, I ask the class what happened, trying to elicit the target feature. The answer is

something like – *Gustavo threw a paper ball at Sabrina.* Then I start to play with the words, emphasizing the nouns, their pronominal substitutes, and pointing to the students involved in the pantomime-- *Class, did Gustavo throw a paper ball at her? He threw a paper ball at her? Sabrina, did he throw a paper ball at you*?-- and so forth. This activity lends itself perfectly to bridge the gap between the theoretical notion of subject (someone or something that performs the action) and object (someone or something that receives the action), and the real physical experience of being the subject and receiving the action. I call on every student, and prompt as many objective and subjective pronouns as possible. To elicit the objective form *them*, for example, I throw several pieces of crumpled paper at a group of students sitting to the left of the classroom and ask the group sitting to the right what happened -- *You threw paper balls at them*. This simulation can be extended as needed.

Simultaneously, I draw a chart on the board (see appendix B) with the sentences and pronoun forms being prompted. In this chart, the students see the names of those who perform the action, the action that takes place, and the names of those who receive the action. Every name is replaced by the corresponding pronoun as the simulation develops, and I lead the group to conclude where and how one case and not the other occurs. Actually, both the simulation and the chart draw on the notional concept of subject and object.

Thirdly, I invite the class to recite the chant again, asking them to help me to complete the chart using examples present in the chant. In doing this, I enable

the students to connect language elicited by means of total physical response to language present in a text.

As an additional activity, you might consider using visual aids to further hammer the point through questions and answers. For instance, I use a picture in which a doctor is giving a baby girl a shot, and I ask questions such as *What is the doctor doing?*, *Who is the mother holding?*

Fourth, I use an audio lingual technique that definitely has a place in a communicative paradigm, if used after meaningful, comprehensive input: drilling. I orally prompt the class to replace the nouns with pronouns in several sentences, modeling after a given example: *Mary bathed the twins. She bathed them.* Again, I first call on students individually, and then ask for choral repetition. This exercise reinforces the taught concepts and contribute to the internalization process and the education of the students' ears.

Now it is time to explicitly explain some basic rules about the usage of pronoun case. The class, at this stage, already knows at a subconscious level, that the forms are not interchangeable, and that they vary depending on how and where they are in a sentence. So, I go back to the chart and show them that at sentence initial position (before the verb), we normally use the subjective case; that at sentence final position, after the verb, we normally use the objective case; and that after a preposition, we can only use an objective form. The chart, which stays on the board during the whole class, is instrumental to the visualization of these simple, basic rules. Naturally, there are many other technicalities involved in

pronoun usage. However, these are the rules our students can carry and activate at the moment of language production. If they ask for more details, there is nothing wrong in meeting their needs. Or yet, if the need arises as the course develops, do provide them with the additional and adequate explanation (see appendix E).

Also, there is a trick of the trade which is very handy in some cases, as in the sentence *For Jim and I the interview was a disaster*. Basically, I teach them to try one pronoun at a time (alone), substitute other pronouns for the entire phrase, or omit the other people named in the sentence. Therefore, they can substitute *Jim and I* for *we* and check if it is acceptable (by ear): *For we the interview was a disaster*. An educated ear will tell this is not the correct usage. Or, learners can omit *Jim -- For I the interview was a disaster* – creating an equally unacceptable form for our ears. Consequently, by substituting and omitting, learners are led to conclude that the subjective form is required -- *For Jim and me the interview was a disaster*.

Finally, to reinforce the oral practice and the rules they have just learned, I give them written exercises. There are several possibilities. I normally use a fill-in-the-blanks exercise, a cloze (which will also draw on their ability to check for pronoun antecedents), and a labeling exercise using the same chant (they have to label every pronoun form as *doing the action*, *receiving the action*, or *after a preposition*).

Before dismissing the class, I make some final comments on formal and informal speech as far as pronoun usage is concerned. It is my belief that we must teach our students the language that reflects the reality of their linguistic environment. Sometimes, this language does not reflect the standard usage. For example, I point out that they will frequently listen to utterances such as *He is the boy who I saw. This is me. You are shorter than him,* and that in informal usage there is nothing wrong with these sentences. I tell them that very probably, because the pronoun occurs at sentence final position, or in the slot that would normally belong to the objective case, it ends up taking this form. Nevertheless, in formal usage, as it is the case in written language, we must use the standard form, according to the rules practiced in class. To close, I normally invite the class to recite the chant once more.

I hope you find these activities helpful. In a two-and-a-half-hour class you can carry them out. It is my belief that they fully realize the objective of pedagogical grammar within a communicative paradigm. They are meaningful, interesting, fun, and involving. In addition, the activities provide students with tools to better communicate and help them to internalize the target structures.

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Appendix A

Sample Chant to Teach Pronoun Case

Miss Lucy[1]

Miss Lucy had a baby
His name was Tiny Tim
SHE put **HIM** in the bathtub
To see if **HE** could swim
HE drank up all the water
HE ate up all the soap
HE tried to eat the bathtub,
But **IT** wouldn't fit his throat.
Miss Lucy had a baby
Her name was Cuddly Kim
SHE put her in the bathtub,
To see if **SHE** could swim.
SHE drank up all the water.
SHE ate up al the soap.
SHE tried to eat the bathtub,
But **IT** wouldn't fit her throat.
Miss Lucy had twins.
Their names were Kim and Tim.
SHE put **THEM** in the bathtub,
To see if **THEY** could swim.
THEY drank up all the water.
THEY ate up all the soap.
THEY tried to eat the bathtub,
But **IT** wouldn't fit their th

[1] Adapted from ESL Activities

Miss Lucy called the doctor.
Miss Lucy called the nurse.
Miss Lucy called the lady
With the alligator purse.
"Mumps," said the doctor.
"Measles," said the nurse.
"Nothing," said the lady
With the alligator purse.
Miss Lucy thanked the doctor.
Miss Lucy thanked the nurse.
Miss Lucy hugged the lady
With the alligator purse.

And now my story's over.
YOU need now study more
I thank **YOU** very kindly
For listening to **ME**.

Appendix B

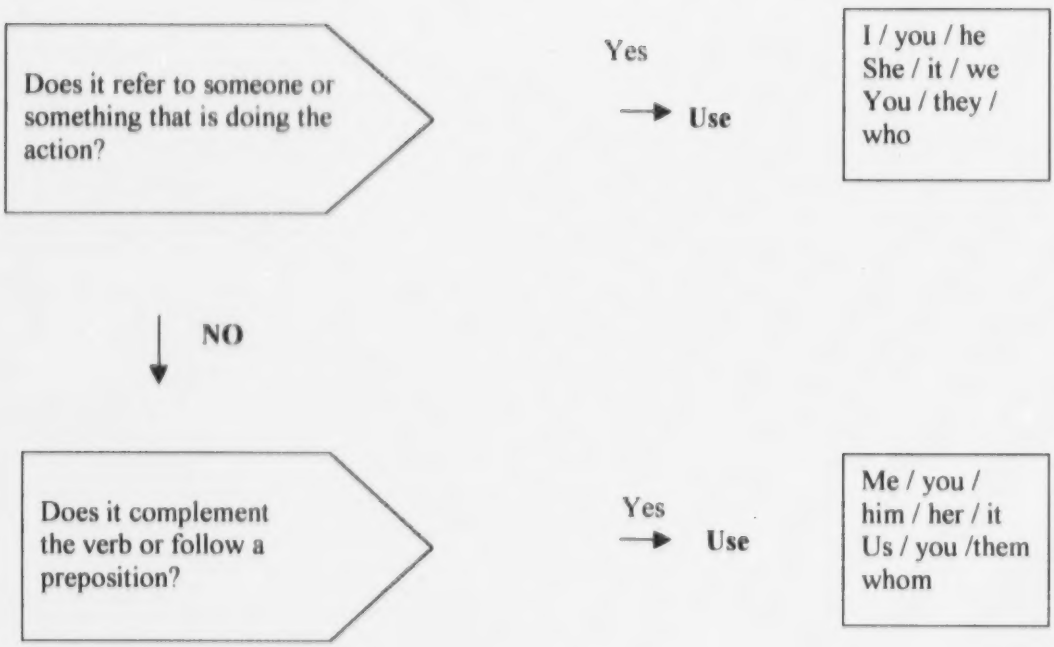
Sample Chart to Teach Pronoun Case

Someone or something that acts		**Action**	**Someone or something** that receives the action
Gustavo	(HE)	threw the paper ball	at Sabrina (HER)
Carolina	(SHE)	threw the paper ball	at Rafael (HIM)
The teacher	(SHE)	threw the paper ball	at the students (THEM)
Miss Lucy	(SHE)	put in the bathtub	Tiny Tim (HIM)
Tiny Tim	(HE)	drank all the water	
The speaker	(I)	thank	the hearers (YOU)
before the action			**after the action** **after the preposition**
SUBJECTIVE			OBJECTIVE

Appendix C

Portable Rules to Teach Pronoun Case

PRONOUN



Appendix D
Detailed Rules to Teach Pronoun Case